

DIFFICULT, CONTROVERSIAL, UNSOLVABLE AND IN ADDITION 'BIG' – WICKED PROBLEMS FOR SOCIETY AND ADMINISTRATION

Book review: Brian W. Head (2022) Wicked Problems in Public Policy. Understanding and Responding to Complex Challenges, Palgrave Macmillan

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Abstract

Wicked problems are permanent, so they cannot be solved, but they can be alleviated. G.W. Head emphasized that several factors increase the possibility of obtaining the significant progress: quality of leaders, sufficient information, financial resources, the capacities of analysts and managers, reliable partners and cross-sector coordination.

Key words: *wicked problems, challenge for the administration, society.*

Every society pits itself against problems for which there is no good answer, and every solution seems to be wrong and no one will be satisfied with it. This is a huge challenge for the administration, which as a bureaucratic factor embodies public policies set by the political factor. These big complex issues, against which are presented conflicting narratives, and the practitioners formulate different options for tackling them, were described by Brian W. Head in the book “Wicked Problems in Public Policy. Understanding and Responding to Complex Challenges”. His approach is based on Horst Rittel and Melvin Webber theory from 1973 (Rittel, Weber, 1973). What's the worst the wicked problems are unique, cannot be studied through trial and error, there is no way to test the solution, there is no end to the number of solutions and every wicked problem is a symptom of another problem².

The reviewed book includes introduction and seven chapters. The author noted in the introduction that his work refers to the democratic context of policymaking and “has little to say directly about policymaking in authoritarian political systems and militarised autocracies” (p. 1). Democracy is pluralism, plurality of stakeholders, polyphony, conflict and discussion about the content of the political agenda. In democracy policy leadership and engagement processes need to take account of divergent interests at local and regional levels, and across industry sectors. B.W. Head based on his practical experience postulated therefore the cooperation between politicians and scientists.

In the first chapter (“Debates in Public Policy – Problem Framing, Knowledge and Interests”) he outlined the dialogue framework and bases of the contentious positions:

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² <https://www.stonybrook.edu/commcms/wicked-problem/about/What-is-a-wicked-problem>

expertise and ideologies. The different and competing policy perspectives and viewpoints are inevitable. These differences are entrenched in values, interests, emotions and ideological assumptions. Even expert opinions are not free from an ideological background: liberal or conservative. It all depends on who will place the problem in the public policy debate and on which level. In other words: who will break through to the mass media, which problem mass media will “buy” and then “sell” to consumers.

B.W. Head therefore stressed the importance of the ‘framing’ – how actors understand the problems and contexts and how responses are articulated, represented through narratives, and further shaped through interaction (p. 9). The perception of the context is very important. It depends on the ideologies and values and has the influence on the suggested solutions. In this way the moral judgements are imposed on the apparently simple policy issues, monopolize the public debate and they make it ineffective. In addition, the society may not see positive benefits of political and economic reforms (Tanev, 2006).

B.W. Head emphasized the role of the response to a tragedy, for example mass shooting in the case of the access to weapons – different in USA and in Australia, Canada and New Zealand. For B.W. Head important is the clarification: how policy actors frame problems and whose interests underlie particular framings. In this way we can see the real ideological positions and cultural assumptions, because they can be often irrational.

In chapter two (“The Rise of ‘Wicked Problems’ – Uncertainty, Complexity and Divergence’) he described the career of the term “wicked problems” and reception of the Rittel’s and Weber’s article from 1973. Over many years their text has not been of interest to other researchers. It started to be noticed after 2008 and now it is most highly cited paper from the journal “Policy Sciences”. By the way it shows the nonsense of the bibliometric indicators.

Horst W.J. Rittel and Melvin M. Weber criticized the technocratic rational planning, because in their opinion it is not able to solve the social problems. Nowadays – as B.W. Head announced – the advantages of the combination of: participation, public deliberation and artificial intelligence systems are emphasized. He also did not ignore the criticism of the “wicked problems” conception. A lot of space in the text is taken up by the analysis of the scientific publications, so these parts of text could be useful for another researchers and can help them find broader literature.

Next B.W. Head pointed out the gradation of the problems: from “tame problem” to “very wicked problem” – when no one knows the solution, there are multiple actors with conflicting values and interests (p. 32). In this situation the wrong choices enlarge the problem and have so serious consequences. Worse still the problem is constantly changing and the changes are happening quickly: the stress level is high and increases the risk of the groupthink. There is, of course, a lack of indicators showing how much an issue is likely to cause social conflict, but artificial intelligence may prove useful for this by analysing the human behaviour.

In chapter three (“Political Governance of Wicked Problems”) he examined strategies used by democratic governments in managing policy conflicts and in responding to complex and contested issues. He distinguished seven strategic processes: 1) avoidance, denial and minimal responsibility, 2) authoritative coercive controls, 3) micro-management of problem elements (compartmentalised micro-management), 4) technocratic problem-solving (science-

based technocracy), 5) incremental and pragmatic adjustment, 6) stakeholder collaboration (collaborative dialogue) 7) and coping and prevention policies (long-term coping and prevention strategies), but – as he wrote – “these seven types are not necessarily distinctive or self-contained choices; rather, they are likely to co-exist in policy practice” (p. 41). In the first strategy, “one common tactic is to deflect responsibility for many of the issues raised in media debates, for example by arguing that the issue is really the responsibility of individuals, families, community groups, business investors, or another level of government” (p. 42). Another styles in this strategy are: symbolic and weak policy responses ('placebo policies') and strategic amnesia.

Coercive controls is a strategy based on centralism and coercion and used to problems especially concerning national security, relating to patriotism, national identity. In B.W. Head's opinion, the political leaders, instead of showing off their heroism, should ensure better coordination and contingency planning.

Compartmentalised Micro-Management consists in dividing the problem into small parts, which are analysed one by one, but the problem is that after solving a small part of the problem, decision makers announce success in solving the... the whole problem. On the other hand – as proves B.W. Head – “There are many reasons to appreciate the contribution of small and cumulative changes. Small improvements can assist in learning about innovation through small-scale pilot schemes (...). Small wins (...) can inform the politics of change and can help to build momentum and support” (p. 49).

Technocratic problem-solving doesn't work because “government leaders cite research evidence when it suits their agendas” (p. 51). The fifth strategy is not easy too since policy process is fuzzy, political and conflictual – the group politics and public opinion in a democratic society have pluralist nature, exist multiple interests and perspectives, what makes it difficult to achieve even a temporary consensus on goals and methods. The decision-makers have limited capacity to deal with large volumes of information and diverse opinions across many issues, so that the decision-making system is characterised by limited rationality. Policy-making process reminds politics of wandering between competing interests. One decision entails another decision, and that decision entails another decision, and the problems escalate. The solution may be an adaptive management model.

Stakeholder collaboration with wicked problems can have many non-standard advantages. It is not about a final solution to the problem, because it is insoluble, but: meeting, negotiating, mutual understanding, joint action, cooperation, social integration and working out a compromise. The last mentioned strategy pursues to practical changes of specific smaller matters. In this approach important is prevention and implementation of the preventive public policies. Probably it can be combined with the corporate social responsibility (Icheva, 2021).

Chapter four (“Complexity, Crises and Coping Strategies”) includes the analysis of the social crises and natural disasters (especially COVID-19). In this way we can know the context of the understanding and managing of wicked problems by policy actors. B.W. Head thinks that the “policymakers typically give higher priority to wicked problems when the challenges are perceived as crises rather than as routine or familiar issues and usually these problems remain off the policy agenda, "perhaps because they are seen as too complex and

messy to handle or because they lack strong and persuasive advocates to champion their importance” (p. 62).

The author compared state management to managing a complex system and he said: „democratic governance is full of trade-offs and paradoxes” (p. 63). Based on the literature he described the using possibilities of the complex system analysis and advantages of the adaptive leadership. He gave accurate conclusion that “policy decisions about crises and wicked problems will be based primarily on leaders' intuitions or political ideologies” (p. 68).

He singled out two types of the crises: 1) caused or triggered by sudden events with massive impacts, 2) creeping crises. It seems that more difficult are “creeping crises”. Government leaders do not want to recognise or understand the full significance of crisis situations. Incorrect and late actions lead to compounding or cumulative harms and side-effects. He pointed out that preferred by politicians short-term interventions delay the solution of the fundamental problem, which in this way will be much more costly and difficult for later generations to tackle. Since the problem is unsolvable the people can only strengthen the readiness of public structures to deal with a crisis situation with the awareness of inevitable losses. B.W. Head cited the Australian report „Natural disaster funding arrangements”: governments tend to “overinvest in post-disaster reconstruction and underinvest in mitigation that would limit the impact of natural disasters” (p. 79). As we know, the bureaucracy is more willing to invest in material things than in the quality. Otherwise the legislative-bureaucratic apparatus needs time for implementation of the changes. The wicked problems do not give the bureaucracy time, but they give the chance for change the current methods (Sivkov, 2011a; Sivkov, 2011b).

In the fifth chapter (“Managing Environmental and Sustainability Challenges”) he described the directions of activities for sustainable development, example managing of the scarce natural resources. He thought what is better: integrated policy planning or pluralist innovation. He highlighted the opportunities of the integrated approach and cited the achievements of the Elinor Ostrom in the area of the polycentric self-organising tradition and cultural theory of Mary Douglas. Using of scientific knowledge to form the environmental policy is also not so obvious. Experts, bureaucrats and other stakeholders have different value systems and “expert knowledge is harnessed to reinforce or legitimate the existing beliefs of participants rather than generate policy learning or new perspectives” (p. 90). Expert bodies are expensive, and they do not undertake new research, only “translate governmental and external research findings as part of the briefing process for senior executives, ministers and legislators” (p. 92). Experts make mistakes, change their minds and select wrong source data.

G.W. Head described different approaches to management of the environmental problems, for example adaptive management, but the main problem is scale and irreversibility of the climate change. There is no consensus in the combating the effects of the complex environmental changes.

Public agencies should respect in the decision process the local government and society point of view. This conclusion taken from the USA on the example of the river basins fits the Polish reality. In Poland management of the public waters has been entrusted to the public agency, established in 2018, „Wody Polskie” (National Water Agency). Her activities are often criticised and those institutions should implement – mentioned by G.W. Head – collaborative governance, taking into account the entrepreneurs voice too.

„Wicked problems” are typical for social policy and G.W. Head described them in the 6. chapter (“Improving Social Well-Being and Social Equity”). Discourse in social policy matters (for example about inequality) depends on professed culture: individualist or collectivist. In addition social problems are often found together, intensified their negative impact. He focused on homelessness and drug regulations. In the first case, he stressed the role of the combination the availability of the home space with charity. Drug policy is one of the classic wicked problems, where one solution which seems good (decriminalising), entails costs in another areas. B.W. Head showed objective analysis of the wicked problems compiling pros and cons. He rightly stressed that the task of scientists is to provide evidence (including challenging established political patterns, falsifying, verifying common knowledge) and co-working with NGOs.

Chapter seven (“Policy Innovation in Turbulent Times”) includes the summary and emphasizing the innovation, social experimentation (we see it in the case of the guaranteed income), policy transitions and populism. The author thought about the crisis and politicization of the social science. “Internet pluralism” – era of data abundance causes that in the situation of the multiplicity of stakeholders, it is easy for any of them to feel left out of the decision-making process. The reducing the negative effects of the wicked problem (which finally solution is not possible) presupposes involving in discussion and compromise building the broadest group of individuals and entities. The researchers should therefore participate in the public discussions.

It is hard to evaluate the innovations in the public policies. Social solutions are not technical patents. For evaluation of the public policy in a democratic society – as wrote G.W. Head – “should be judged by normative criteria such as public value, social equity and environmental impacts” (p. 127). The benefits in some areas are not only often offset by harm or disadvantage in another areas, but – what the author has not written – wicked problem will always start feedback in the public system. Improvement some indicators entails deterioration the others. It is not an option – what mocked Patrick Brian Anse – using of the argument “increase of the beneficiaries satisfaction level” (Anse, 2013). Additionally – what mentioned G.W. Head – in a fast-moving policy field the experiments often go wrong. Therefore – what we know from the Polish reality – instead of implementing “big” reforms across the whole state and turning the legal system “upside-down”, the small-scale local experiments should be realized.

The author sees the glories and shadows of innovation and digitization (as in case of the sharing economy), technological advancement (GMO) and need for strengthening the role of citizens and local communities. His diagnosis is interesting: “citizens' views are highly segmented on many issues. Government leaders therefore have to mediate between the values and interests articulated by multiple ‘publics’, namely: citizens, consumers, business lobbies, community and environmental groups” (p. 137). What happens if the government reject the participation and chose the populist agenda his own partisan political base? G.W. Head's answer is simple: the government using shallow and emotive character of media communication, will reduce the citizens trust for the state, increase the polarization and destroy the legitimization. The wicked problems change the role of the public leaders: they more navigate a turbulent sea than reach the clear policy destinations.

On the book's pages the catalogue of the „wicked problems” was presented: abortion vs. real help for mothers and parents, homelessness and housing policy, energy security and renewable energy, food security, organic farming, using of the herbicide and industrial meat production, unemployment, education, access to guns, immigration, biodiversity protection and forest management, health care, privatization, crime, gender equality, drought and water resources, public transportation, poverty, stimulants like alcohol and soft drugs, economic growth and social inequality, climate change and forest fires.

What is interesting these are such problems, in relation to which, we the voters elect politicians and we do it just so that they solve them. These problems overlap with the doctrinal calques: justice, equality, freedom etc. The solution can give artificial intelligence, but still we can have risk: first – implementation to the system ideologically twisted source data; second – artificial intelligence's autonomous search for ideological information on the web (Paszczka, 2022).

Wicked problems are permanent, so they cannot be solved, but they can be alleviated. Therefore in conclusion G.W. Head emphasized that several factors increase the possibility of obtaining the significant progress: quality of leaders, sufficient information, financial resources, the capacities of analysts and managers, reliable partners and cross-sector coordination (p. 139).

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